

Poirot: Murder at Downton Abbey

by dustnik

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Summary: When a guest is murdered at Downton Abbey, the famous Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot, is called in to solve the case. Will he be in time to prevent a second death?

1. Chapter 1

1926 dawned cold and snowy in the small Yorkshire village of Downton. Most of the village and all the surrounding land, as far as the eye could see, belonged to the Crawley family. Their ancestral seat was Downton Abbey, a Jacobean mansion of immense size and stature, where the family had resided for centuries. Outside its doors, the wind howled, and the snow swirled about, forming deep drifts. Inside, the house was warm and dry, heated by cozy fires lit by harried housemaids.

Robert Crawley, the seventh Earl of Grantham, had felt restless that winter. Since his brush with death the previous summer after a burst ulcer, he was no longer in charge of the day-to-day operation of the estate. That task fell to his headstrong daughter, Lady Mary Talbot, and widowed son-in-law, Tom Branson. It made him feel old and useless. Even his wife, Cora, had her work at the hospital. Instead of resenting her position as he once did, he found himself envying it very much. He knew he needed to find something to do.

It was then that he revisited the idea of erecting a large housing development on the edge of the village on a parcel of land known as Pip's Corner. Mary and Tom had initially supported the plan but later balked at the cost of going forward with the project. Robert would have to find the capital elsewhere. He pitched his idea to an interested Duke of Crowborough at their London club when he was in town for one of his Lord Lieutenant dinners. They discussed the plan at great length with Robert later mailing him all of the pertinent details. The duke agreed to come on board the project, and construction began at the site later that spring.

Before the war, the duke had once been an honored houseguest at the abbey. At the time, it was believed he was planning to make an offer of marriage to Lady Mary. But upon learning that the estate and the bulk of the money were entailed away from the eldest Crawley daughter, he abruptly changed his mind and departed. It left Mary broken-hearted and humiliated and her parents furious, but now that he and Robert were working together, it seemed better to leave all that in the past.

One sunny afternoon, the earl was seated in the library with his dog, Tiaa, on the floor at his feet when his wife strolled in. He was startled and jumped slightly, causing his wife to remark, "Goodness, I hope I haven't interrupted some deep thought."

Robert smiled lovingly at her. "I was just thinking I might take a walk to Pip's Corner and see how the building is coming along. Would you care to join me?"

"Actually, I'm busy organizing a little house party for the weekend. Edith and Bertie are driving down, and your sister agreed to come. We'll have a big dinner while they're here and invite Isobel and Dickie, and Mama, of course. It will be like old times."

Her husband nodded his approval. "The duke has been anxious to see the progress being made in the village. You should ask him too."

Cora frowned. She hadn't forgiven the peer for throwing over her daughter and wasn't eager to welcome him into their home again. "Are you sure, darling? Wouldn't it be better to stick to family and friends?"

"Nonsense. You must be sure to invite him." He called to Tiaa. "Come, girl."

* * *

><p>Plans for the house party were proceeding rapidly. Cora was down in the kitchen, going over the menus with Mrs. Patmore, the cook, while the maids had been instructed to prepare the extra bedrooms by the housekeeper, Mrs. Hughes. Upstairs, Robert had returned home and was discussing the weekend with Thomas Barrow. "This will be your first big event as butler, Barrow. I hope it won't prove to be too much for you."<p>

"I think I'm up to it, m'lord," the younger man replied, flashing a broad smile meant to convey confidence. He wished everyone would stop treating him like he was made of glass. He had survived a suicide attempt the previous year, committed after losing his place at Downton Abbey. He had reluctantly taken another post nearby but happily returned when he was offered the position of butler.

The earl was studying him closely. "Why don't you ask Carson to help you? He'll know how to manage things."

The last thing Thomas wanted was the ex-butler looking over his shoulder. "There's really no need to bother â€" "

"I think it's best, Barrow," Robert insisted.

Thomas knew when he was beaten. "Yes, m'lord." He glowered as he made his way downstairs.

Phyllis Baxter, Lady Grantham's maid, was seated in the servants' hall, nibbling on a slice of bread and jam but rose automatically when he entered. "You look like you could use this," she observed ruefully, handing him a steaming cup of tea.

"His Lordship wants Mr. Carson to oversee the house party. Apparently, he doesn't think I'm capable."

"I'm sure that's not the reason." The kind, gentle woman offered him a warm smile. "He probably doesn't want you to take too much on yourself."

"Why? Because I'm fragile and weak and might try to top myself again if things go wrong?" He knew he shouldn't be taking his frustration out on the lady's maid. She had proven herself a loyal friend, being the one to save him from dying. "I'm sorry. It's not your fault."

"Be patient, Mr. Barrow. Give it time."

The butler had a sudden idea. "Do you think Mr. Molesley would help us out this weekend?"

"He might. You could ask him." The ex-footman, now a teacher at the village school, had expressed a willingness to don his livery again, if needed, for large parties and the like.

"I bet he'd come if you asked him," Thomas remarked with a sly grin.

Miss Baxter blushed. "Don't be silly." She rose from her chair, unable to look the butler in the eye. "I'd better get on."

Later, Barrow and the young footman, Andy Parker, were serving tea in the library to the assembled family members. The conversation centered on the coming weekend. Cora explained, "Edith and Bertie will be driving down on Friday and should arrive in time for tea. Rosamund will call us later with her train time. I've asked Mama, and Isobel and Dickie to join us for dinner on Saturday." She turned to her husband. "What time did the duke say he'd get here?"

There was a loud clink of china as Mary's cup rattled in her saucer. "What?"

Lady Grantham offered her an apologetic smile. "I was going to tell you. We've asked the duke to come. Your father wants to show him the progress being made on Pip's Corner."

"You can't be serious. It's bad enough that Papa has gone into business with the wretched man. Now you've invited him to stay here?"

Tom Branson was confused by his sister-in-law's vehemence. "Who's this we're talking about?"

Robert explained. "The Duke of Crowborough. I told you â€" my partner in the housing development project." He then turned to Mary's

husband, Henry Talbot. "He'd be about your age. You must have come across him somewhere."

Henry's face darkened. "I believe we have met, but it was many years ago now."

Luckily, no one noticed Barrow, standing at attention. He looked like he had seen a ghost.

2. Chapter 2

Mr. Carson arrived early on Friday to fuss over the details of the house party with Barrow, much to the younger man's dismay. "I think we'll serve the Veuve Clicquot tonight and save the ChÂ¢teau Chasse-Spleen for tomorrow when the dowager is here. You'll want to decant that at least two hours before they eat." It was clear he missed his days as butler and enjoyed being back in charge. "You'll have to pour, of course, but I'll be there to keep an eye on things."

"Yes, Mr. Carson." Thomas was perfectly capable of managing on his own and found it all rather demeaning.

"Have you instructed Mr. Molesley and Andrew on the correct way to address the duke?" Before Thomas could reply, the older man thought of something else. "Make sure Andrew's hair is combed properly. We can't have him looking like a young hobbledoey."

"Yes, Mr. Carson," Thomas repeated with a sigh.

* * *

><p>The Marquess and Marchioness of Hexham were the first to arrive that afternoon along with little Marigold. Lady Hexham, the former Edith Crawley, was the middle daughter of the family; the youngest, Lady Sybil, died in childbirth. She had recently married Bertie Pelham and began a new life away from Downton. The pair made their home in Northumberland in a palatial residence called Brancaster Castle with Edith's "ward," Marigold. In reality, the little girl was her daughter, a fact known within the family, and strongly suspected by a few of the servants. Upon her arrival, the child was promptly dispatched to the Downton nursery to join her cousins, Sybbie Branson and George Crawley, the heir presumptive to the title and estate.</p>

The footman, Andy, and the one remaining hall boy, Billy, were assigned the task of unloading the luggage under the watchful eye of Mr. Barrow. The butler was determined that nothing should go wrong this weekend.

A chauffeured car was dispatched to the train station and returned with Lady Rosamund Painswick. She greeted her brother and his family enthusiastically before they all filed back inside. Later, the car returned to the station for the Duke of Crowborough. The family and their servants were assembled out front to welcome him. The duke appeared much altered since his last visit. His hair was thinning, and he had put on considerable weight. The aristocrat immediately sought out his hostess. "Thank you for your invitation, Lady Grantham. It was very kind of you."

Cora managed a stiff smile. "Not at all, Duke. We were happy you could come on such short notice. You know my daughters, but I don't believe you've met the others." She indicated a well dressed, middle-aged woman. "Lady Rosamund Painswick, Lord Grantham's sister."

The aristocrat acknowledged her with a polite nod.

"This is Tom Branson. He was Lady Sybil's husband. He's the agent now."

"Tom." The duke held out his hand, surprised at the strength of the other man's grip.

"And this is Lord Hexham, Lady Edith's husband."

"Oh â€“ call me Bertie." The new marquess seemed unable to meet the duke's eye.

"You must be Peter's heir. I read about his death in Tangiers. What a tragedy."

"Yes. Yes, it was," Bertie mumbled.

Cora continued. "And finally, there's Lady Mary's husband, Henry Talbot."

There was no disguising the look of animosity on Henry's face. The duke forced a smile. "We were at Oxford together."

Cora sensed that something was wrong and attempted to cover the awkwardness. "Shall we go inside?"

The duke fixed Lord Grantham with an apologetic smile. "I'm afraid I'm here without a valet again. They never seem to stay these days."

Robert appealed to Thomas. "That won't be a problem, will it?"

"Certainly not, m'lord."

The duke pretended to consider him. "I remember you. You served me before. Thomas, isn't it?"

"Yes, but it's Barrow now, Your Grace. I'm the butler here."

A look of surprise came over the aristocrat's face before he remembered himself. "Perhaps, a footman then?" he indicated Andy who was standing at attention.

Thomas' eyes narrowed. "I will attend to Your Grace myself."

When they were inside, the duke asked, "Is there somewhere I could freshen up. The train was so horribly dusty."

"Yes. Of course." Robert turned to the butler. "Barrow?"

Thomas smiled obligingly. "If you'd care to follow me, I can show you

to your room."

The peer accompanied him upstairs to the bachelors' corridor while Andy and Billy brought up the cases. The duke dropped down on the bed, watching as the capable butler unpacked his things, placing the smaller items in the bureau drawers and the larger ones in the wardrobe. "How have you been, Thomas? We haven't seen each other since before the war. It must be thirteen — no, fourteen years now."

"I'm quite well, Your Grace."

"You can still call me Philip when we're alone. After all, we're old friends, you and I."

Barrow didn't reply, keeping his expression purposely blank.

"So, you're a butler now. When we met, you were still a lowly footman. But then, you always were the ambitious type, weren't you?" He reached for Thomas' gloved hand. "What's this?"

The butler pulled away. "I was wounded in the war."

"You served? Very brave of you. Unfortunately, I was excused — for medical reasons, of course." He carefully studied the other man.

"You're getting old, Thomas."

Barrow looked him up and down and let out a derisive snort.

The duke nodded. "Yes, I know. I've gotten fat, and my hair is falling out, but what can I do? It comes with being married. I really can't recommend it."

"You're married now," Thomas observed with amusement. "Who's the lucky lady?"

"Her name is Catherine. She's the eldest daughter of the viceroy. Scads of money but not much else, I'm afraid. Still, she did give me two healthy heirs — Edwin and Cyril — both lovely little chaps."

"And you're a father too. How did you manage the conceptions?"

"That's what alcohol is for. And I can still fantasize about our times together in London."

"Why isn't the duchess with you?"

"When I'm in the country, she prefers to be in town, and when I'm in town, she prefers the country. We find the arrangement suits us both." He paused, attempting to strike a seductive pose. "Will you come to visit me tonight, Thomas?"

"You must be joking."

"Then perhaps, you could send up that luscious, young footman." He noted the butler's look of alarm and added, "Unless you're keeping him all to yourself."

"For God's sake, he's just a lad," Thomas hissed, turning on his heel, and slipped out the door. He returned to the servants' hall for his tea in time to see Mr. Molesley arrive.

The teacher had come directly from school when class let out, and he was out of breath. "I came as quickly as I could."

Thomas suddenly had an idea. "Mr. Molesley, I know I asked you here as a footman, but I wonder if you'd mind seeing to the duke too while he's here. Mr. Bates is attending to Lord Hexham as well as His Lordship, and I remembered that you're a trained valet."

The quiet, modest man appeared flattered. "Why, I'd be happy to, Mr. Barrow. I'll just go change into my livery."

Thomas smiled to himself, imagining the duke's reaction upon seeing the balding, middle-aged educator at his door.

3. Chapter 3

Dinner that night passed without incident with Mr. Carson standing vigil next to the sideboard. Thomas felt like he'd been reduced to his under-butler status once more. When the meal was over, the women went through to the drawing room for coffee while the men remained behind with their brandy and cigars.

The duke turned to Henry. "So, what kind of work do you do?"

Henry paused. "I sell second-hand cars."

The duke chuckled. "Surely, not."

"Does that surprise you?"

Tom jumped in. "It's true. Henry and I started a business together in York â€“ Talbot and Branson Motors. It's not much now, but in time, we hope to open a proper dealership, and maybe, even go into production."

The duke was astonished. "What does Lady Mary think about it?"

Tom answered for both of them. "She couldn't be prouder."

The duke then turned his attention to Bertie. "How do you like living at Brancaster? I spent many happy times there as a guest of your cousin's. How is it we never met?"

"Before Peter's death, I was only the estate agent."

Tom pretended to be affronted. "_I'm_ an estate agent."

Bertie explained himself. "I didn't mean it like that. Cousin Peter was kind to offer me the position, and I enjoyed it very much. It suited me."

The duke was stunned into silence. Used car salesmen and estate agents. These were Grantham's sons-in-law?

Robert interrupted his reflections. "We'll take a walk down to the

building site in the morning."

"I'm anxious to see it. The project is frightfully over budget, and I'm not prepared to sink any more money into it."

The earl frowned and threw back his brandy. "We should rejoin the ladies."

When they entered the drawing room, the women were discussing Lady Mary's pregnancy. "The duke was quick to congratulate her. "Is it your first?"

Mary pursed her lips haughtily, reluctant to speak to the man who had thrown her over. "My first with Henry. I have a son, George, by my late husband, Matthew. He's the heir to his grandfather's title and estate."

The duke turned to Lady Hexham. "And what about you?"

Edith blushed. "Bertie and I are only recently married, but we do hope to have a family someday."

Mary had had enough. "I'm feeling rather tired. I'm afraid I must say goodnight."

"Of course, darling," Cora cooed. "Goodnight."

"I'll come with you." Henry followed her up the main staircase to their room on the gallery, closing the door behind them. "Are you feeling alright?"

"I'm perfectly fine. I just couldn't sit there and make small talk with that odious man."

"You never told me how you met."

Mary explained. "It was before the war when I was still quite young. He was a guest at my coming-out ball, and we shared several dances together. We saw each other at various parties after that, and he seemed to be very taken with me."

"Were you taken with him?"

"Well, I was taken with the idea of becoming a duchess anyway. He wrote to Mama, inviting himself to stay. I thought we all thought that he was coming here to propose. He spoke with Papa, but when he found out the estate and money were entailed away, he changed his mind. You see, it wasn't me he wanted. It was the money all along. It was so humiliating, and if that weren't bad enough, I had to put up with Edith's crowing."

"I'm so sorry, darling, but I think you should consider yourself lucky to be shot of him."

"How do you know him?"

"We were in the same year at Oxford. Philip and I were friends back then before He stopped abruptly."

"Go on," his wife urged.

"I never told you this. I don't know why really. There was an incident while we were there â€“ a scandal. Someone had managed to get their hands on a copy of an important test paper before the day of the exam. It was passed around to a small group of mediocre students who all produced spectacularly well written papers. The professor became leery and reported the suspected cheating. The matter was brought to the attention of the Honor Council, and there was an inquiry. Their investigation seemed to be closing in on Philip and two of his friends, but we were all forced to testify before the Conduct Board. I couldn't tell them anything because I knew nothing about it. I earned my good grade honestly."

"Of course, you did," Mary agreed loyally.

"Philip came to my room to discuss the situation. He was worried that he might be expelled if the council believed him to be guilty. As the heir to his father's duchy, he would be disgraced. He seemed very upset, and asked for a glass of water. I thought nothing more of it until the next day when several members of the board unexpectedly showed up to search my room. Having nothing to hide, I agreed, if only to prove I had no part in the affair. They rifled through my bureau drawers and found the copy of the test paper under a pile of clean shirts. They turned to me for an explanation, but I had none to give them. I knew the document hadn't been there the morning before when I put the shirts away."

Mary was shocked. "It was the duke. He was the one who stole the exam paper."

"I don't know if he was the one who took it, but he was certainly the one who planted it in my drawer when I was getting him the water. I tried to defend myself, but they didn't believe me. They were planning to expel me until my father came up from London to reason with them. In the end, I was found guilty of academic misconduct and put on probation. Of course, my reputation was ruined, and my plan to follow in my father's footsteps as a member of parliament was over."

Mary put her arms around her husband. "How terrible for you. Everyone thought you had done it."

"One older boy believed my story, having had his own run-ins with Philip. It was Charlie Rogers."

"Good old Charlie," Mary lamented. The racing car driver had been killed in a crash the previous year.

"So, there you have it. If it weren't for the duke, you might have been married to an MP."

"I'm not complaining." She kissed her husband tenderly. "Now, let me ring for Anna, so we can go to bed."

Back in the drawing room, the family and their guests were just finishing their whiskey and making their way up to bed. The valets and lady's maids were sent for while Barrow and Carson returned downstairs, leaving Andy to collect the empty glasses. Mrs. Hughes was waiting to accompany her husband back to the cottage they shared on the estate. "How did it go?" she asked him.

"Fine, Mrs. Hughes. As you know, the key is in the planning." He turned to Barrow. "Don't worry. I'll be back tomorrow."

Thomas managed a weak smile. After everyone was tucked away for the night, he made one final tour of the gallery. He passed Andy coming down the corridor. "What are you doing here?"

The footman appeared agitated. "Nothing, Mr. Barrow. Nothing at all. Goodnight."

4. Chapter 4

The next day dawned unseasonably warm. After breakfast, Henry and Tom set off for York while Robert and the duke were eager to visit the site of the housing development. When the latter pair arrived at Pip's Corner, they saw that all work had ceased. Robert searched about for the builders, but they were nowhere to be found. The only person he saw was Mr. Strong, the head of the abbey's maintenance team. A puzzled Robert was quick to address him. "Hello, Strong. Do you know where the builders are?"

"Gone, m'lord" the man answered succinctly. "All the equipment's been removed too."

"What? Why?"

"I couldn't say, but I've had my doubts about them from the start. There was something not quite right there."

Robert became angry. "Why didn't you speak up?"

The little man rose to his full height. "Begging your pardon, but it wasn't my place to question Your Lordship's decision."

The duke interjected. "Do you see any problems with the work that's been done so far?"

"The bricks are of poor quality â€“ not fired properly, and the mortar is already beginning to crumble."

Robert looked like he might faint. "We should see inside."

The three men carefully entered one of the homes where little work had been done. Mr. Strong shook his head angrily. "They used green lumber. You can see how it's beginning to warp and split already."

"But surely it can all be repaired?" the desperate earl inquired.

The maintenance man shook his head sadly. "In my opinion, it will have to be torn down and rebuilt using proper materials."

"All the others too?" Robert asked weakly.

"Aye, if they're like this one, m'lord."

"Thank you, Mr. Strong," the duke said, effectively dismissing him.

"We would appreciate it if you kept this to yourself." The little man nodded and left the two aristocrats alone.

Robert spoke first. "I don't understand it. The builders came highly recommended."

"Did you follow up on their references?"

"Of course, I did. They even showed me one of the finished homes here, and I didn't notice anything amiss."

"They probably completed several houses properly to avoid suspicion. They would have showed you one of them."

"We'll go to the police. They'll find these men and make them return the money."

"I hope so, for your sake, Grantham."

"What do you mean 'for my sake'?"

"If you read our contract, it says I am to be repaid in full after two years, plus ten percent."

"But surely, you can see that won't be possible now. I'll find a way to pay back everything you've lost, but it will take several years."

"I expect to receive the full amount I was promised when it was promised, even if it means taking you to court." He added, "I'll see you back at the house."

After he left, the earl hurried off to the police station and filed a report. He was told that he'd been the victim of a clever gang operating throughout Britain. The scam was always the same, but usually on a much smaller scale. They would keep him informed of any developments. Robert wasn't anxious to return to the abbey and found himself at the Dower House.

The Dowager Lady Grantham was seated at her desk, composing a letter to an old friend when her butler, Septimus Spratt, announced her son. "Lord Grantham."

Violet turned to see Robert enter, looking very pale, his face wearing a ghastly expression. She knew immediately that something was terribly wrong. "What's happened?"

The earl took a seat on the sofa as his concerned mother rose to join him. The dowager waited in silence for him to begin. At last, he told her the whole sorry tale, including the duke's threat to sue him.

"How much money are we talking about?" she asked. When he told her the amount, her jaw dropped. "Good God! What are you going to do?"

"I don't know, Mama."

"And what about the dinner tonight? Will you cancel it?"

"We'll go ahead as if nothing has happened. I don't want anyone to know yet."

The dowager nodded her approval. "Quite right. After he's gone, we'll all sit down and come up with a plan." Her expression softened as tears began to roll down her son's face. "Oh, my dear boy." She pulled him close to her, and he wept on her shoulder like a child.

Back at the abbey, Edith was perched on a bench beneath an ancient cedar tree with Marigold romping in the grass at her feet. The house had been stifling hot, and even outside, the air hung heavy and still. She watched as the Duke of Crowborough approached them from the direction of the village. When he drew near, Edith asked, "Where's Papa?"

"I believe he had an errand to see to." He turned his attention to Marigold. "She's the spitting image of you. I should have liked to have a daughter."

Edith became flustered. "This is my ward, Marigold. My family took her in when the tenant farmer she was living with wasn't able to keep her any longer. She's no relation."

The duke smiled knowingly. "Isn't she?" He nodded and continued on his way.

Edith sat in stunned silence until Bertie suddenly dropped down beside her, causing her to jump. "I hope you don't mind my joining you. You looked like you were a million miles away."

"Of course, I don't mind." Edith loved her new husband dearly. She mused, "I wish we'd never come here."

Bertie seemed puzzled. "Aren't you enjoying spending time with your family?"

"I am, but I can't wait to get home again â€“ our home." She added, "The duke guessed about Marigold."

"Did you tell him the truth?"

"No, of course, not. Why would I? Oh, I wish we could just leave. There's something wrong here. Can't you feel it?"

"We should go inside. It's nearly time for luncheon."

That evening, preparations for the dinner party were underway. Molesley and Andy were laying the table under the watchful eye of Mr. Barrow. Thomas suddenly remembered Carson's directive from the day before and started chuckling. "Oh, Andy, Mr. Carson said to make sure your hair is combed. He doesn't want you to look like a 'hobbledehoy' whatever that is."

Instead of being amused, Andy nodded solemnly. "Yes, Mr. Barrow."

Thomas saw that something was bothering the young footman. Perhaps, he'd had an argument with Daisy. He and the assistant cook had become very close since the year began. "Is everything alright, Andy? You and Daisy haven't fallen out, have you?"

"Daisy? No, it's nothing like that."

Then, there was something. "Mr. Molesley, would you tell Mr. Carson I'll be right down to decant the wine?" The teacher looked surprised but obeyed wordlessly. "Now, what's wrong, Andy? You're not leaving until you tell me."

The footman stared down at the floor. Finally, he mumbled, "The duke â€“"

Thomas felt his heart leap into his throat. "What about the duke?" When he received no answer, he asked again, "What did the duke do, Andy?"

"I don't want to talk about it." The lanky footman slipped past the butler and hurried out of the dining room. Thomas suddenly remembered seeing him on the gallery the night before. He had been coming from the direction of the bachelors' corridor. A terrible idea was taking shape in Thomas' mind, and his expression became grim.

5. Chapter 5

Robert had returned to the abbey in time for luncheon. Afterwards, he hid himself away in the smoking room, leaving the others to manage the guests. When he didn't appear for his tea, Mr. Carson took a tray into him. The ex-butler could immediately see that something was terribly wrong. The two men had become friends of sorts during Carson's long tenure at the abbey. "Is everything alright, Your Lordship?"

"I am a fool, Carson."

"Nothing of the sort, m'lord."

"It's true. Without Lady Mary and Mr. Branson, I would have sunk this estate. I still might," he added despondently.

The loyal retainer was unsure how to help. "Has something happened?" he permitted himself to ask.

"I should never have gone into business with the duke. He's not a good sort of man." Carson privately agreed, still angry that Lady Mary had been denied her duchess' crown. Robert groused, "I suppose we'll have to go on with this wretched dinner."

"I think we're in good shape with Mr. Barrow, Andrew, and Molesley to serve."

"Quite. Thank you, Carson."

The older man moved toward the door, turning once more to address the earl. "I would do anything for this family â€“ anything. I hope you know that."

* * *

><p>A car was dispatched to fetch Isobel and Dickie, and the dowager. When they arrived, they were ushered into the drawing room. Lady Rosamund was quick to greet her mother with a kiss on the cheek. "How

are you, Mama?"<p>

"You'd know if you had come to see me."

Cora smiled patiently. "Mama, you remember the duke."

"Yes, we met here once before the war." She eyed him coldly. He had treated her granddaughter abominably.

Cora continued quickly. "Lord and Lady Merton â€“ the Duke of Crowborough."

The duke nodded dutifully at the elderly couple while Isobel fixed him with a pleasant smile. "Is there no duchess?"

"There is," the duke assured her, "but unfortunately, she's in town at the moment. Else, she would have loved to be here."

Robert stood silent, lost in thought, until he heard Barrow announce, "Dinner is served, m'lady." The group filed into the large dining room. They took their assigned seats with the butler pouring a light, white wine and the footmen following with hors d'oeuvres and oysters.

Lady Rosamund spoke to Edith across the table. "There's to be a meeting of the Hillcrest trustees next month. Will you be able to make it down for it?"

"What's this?" the duke inquired politely.

Rosamund explained. "Lady Hexham and I are on the board of Hillcrest College. It's a school for young women from modest backgrounds. They are doing wonderful work there."

"My goodness," he smiled. "I wonder that Lady Hexham can find the time what with running Brancaster and caring for her 'ward.' " He gave the last word a slight emphasis, causing Bertie to glance over at him.

The dinner continued through the ten courses in a rather subdued fashion. The heat was oppressive, but there was a current of something else too, something running just beneath the surface. Little pools of conversations sprang up here and there but quickly dried up. Finally, Cora announced, "I think we'll go through."

As the women stepped away from the table, Robert told the party. "I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me. I'm not feeling very well."

Cora became immediately concerned. "What's wrong, darling? Please, say it isn't your stomach. Do you want to send for Dr. Clarkson?" Mr. Carson too looked worried.

"It's only a headache. I'm sure it will be gone in the morning."

Cora sensed that something unpleasant had occurred between her husband and the duke. He hadn't been himself since their walk to the village. She only hoped that they hadn't fallen out. "Then, I don't think we'll split tonight," she told the others, leading everyone back to the drawing room. Barrow, Molesley, and Andy expertly served

coffee while Carson looked on.

Dickie was eager to hear about Henry's and Tom's flourishing car business. "I keep meaning to get over there to see it for myself, but I never do." The pair was happy to fill him in.

The duke seemed amused. "You sound as if you envy them, Lord Merton."

"I do, by golly. I help coordinate the fundraising efforts for the hospital now, but I would have liked to do a proper job. When I was young, I wanted to study medicine, but my father didn't think it an appropriate profession for a gentleman."

"No, indeed."

"How do you spend your time, Duke?" Isobel asked.

"I like to travel -- Berlin, Tangiers, and of course, America."

Edith exchanged a surprised look with her husband. "That's funny. Didn't you tell me your cousin, Peter, liked visiting those same places?"

"Yes," Bertie mumbled.

Thomas stood listening to the conversation in disbelief. How was it possible that these people didn't see?

Henry rose to join his wife on a small settee. "You've been very quiet tonight."

"I can't stand it -- having to sit here with that horrible man, knowing what he did to you. It's too much to bear."

Cora, Violet, and Rosamund were huddled together on the other side of the room, speaking in hushed tones. "What's the matter with my dear brother?" Lady Painswick inquired. "We've hardly seen him all day."

Cora frowned. "I'm not sure. I think it might have something to do with the housing project he's working on with the duke."

"But I thought everything was progressing well there."

Violet snapped at her daughter. "Well, perhaps things have changed."

Cora turned to her mother-in-law suspiciously. "Do you know something I don't know?"

"Of course, not. What could I know?"

Thomas poured out small glasses of whiskey and Molesley and Andy were distributing them to the family and their guests. The duke smiled slyly at Andy as he reached for a glass, setting it on the little table beside him.

Suddenly, the sound of a loud impact was heard outside. Tom Branson

was the first to reach an open window. "I think someone has crashed through the wall." The others were now gathering about too, the family and their guests looking out from two large windows, the menservants from another. Tom and Henry hurried out to the scene while the others returned to their seats and the servants to their stations.

"Heavens, I hope no one is hurt," Cora fretted.

At last, Henry returned. "A young man was driving too fast, lost control of his car, and crashed through the wall â€“ drunk, I'm afraid. Tom is giving him a ride down to the village where he'll put up at the pub. That's all we can really do tonight."

The duke rose with the remainder of his whiskey in hand. "I'm feeling a bit tired. I think I'll just take this and slip away. Goodnight." Thomas indicated to Molesley to accompany him.

"Yes, I'm ready to leave too," the dowager agreed. The car was sent for, and she and Lord and Lady Merton made their goodbyes.

The next morning, Molesley returned to the abbey for breakfast. It felt strange to fall back into his old routine after beginning a new career as a teacher, living alone in his own cottage. He couldn't wait to tell his students that he had spent the weekend attending to a real duke. After their meal was over, he made his way upstairs with a tea tray while Thomas and Andy waited in the kitchen to carry up the breakfast items. The lanky footman looked pale and ill, causing Thomas to inquire, "Are you alright, Andy? If you're not feeling well, I can manage with Mr. Molesley today."

"I'm fine, Mr. Barrow."

Just then, Molesley hurriedly reappeared looking shocked and distraught. "You'd better come upstairs, Mr. Barrow."

"Why? What is it?"

"It's the duke. He's dead."

End
file.